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Orange hummock

Harriet Prescott Spofford

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Recommended Citation

Spofford, Harriet Prescott, "Orange hummock" (1886). *Text Materials of Central Florida*. 166.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/cfm-texts/166>



AN ORANGE HUMMOCK.

By Harriet Prescott Spofford.

Julian could hardly remember the fine old times before the war, although it could not be said to be the fault of his mother and his elder sisters, or of old Mammy Dinah, all of whom kept the legends of those times pretty constantly before his eyes and ears. The splendor, the company, the feasts, the slaves, all seemed to him the veriest idle story beside the fact of unvarying corn-bread and bacon now.

The house was tumbling to pieces; he wondered if there was a worse ruin in all Florida; the almost boundless extent of the lands was uncultivated; the slaves were all gone.

"I don't see why we should be poor," said Julian, having made up his mind for a good square talk at last, "with all the land there is here."

"That's half the reason," said his father.

"But I thought that it was off the land people made their money."

"When they already have money and the hands with which to cultivate land. It takes hands and it takes means to grow cotton and sugar. I can hardly be expected to go to work myself!"

"Then," persisted Julian, "why couldn't we hire people, and pay them from the crop when it comes?"

"You don't know what you are talking about, my son."

"I know we have hundreds of acres of land, and if they were mine, I think that I could do something with them."

"You may do what you please with them," said his father. "I give you *carte blanche*," and he went back to the reading of his *Congressional Record*. Or at least he would have gone back, if Julian would have let him. But Julian had not begun to talk without being very much in earnest, and now he meant to go through.

"Well," he said, laughing, "*carte blanche* is a good thing to have, but one needs some help to do anything with even that. I think if you will let me have the hummock in Okemolkekee Everglade, and will lend old Cy to Dandridge and me"—

"Old Cyrus! What would your mother do without him, and what would Rachel and Rebecca do? The only one of all the hands that has stayed faithful to us! You can do nothing without capital."

"But Northern people come here, and seem sure of doing well. And we have the land they come to buy. That's capital. If you lend old Cy to Dan and me, we won't ask you for more, for we've been saving our odd pennies for this, and we've got enough to buy all the grafts we want, and Col. Burbeck will give us some besides."

"Grafts?" said his father, pushing up his silver-bowed spectacles in perplexity. "Grafts?"

"Yes."

"What are you going to do with grafts?"

"Look at them," said Julian, with a grin. "So I see you'll lend me Cy. What if Rachel went along with us?"

"Your mother might not approve."

"Mother'll approve fast enough, I reckon, when we're getting five thousand a year."

"Five thousand a year!" cried his father, letting the *Congressional Record* fall. "Have you gone daft, Julian?"

"Well, father," said Julian, with a great laugh, throwing back the dark curl that was always dropping into his eyes, "I'll send for you to make us a visit on the big hummock in Okemolkekee Everglade by-and-by, and then we'll see."

"I don't know about it; I don't know," said his father, picking up the scattered leaves of his cherished document. But Julian knew that his father would lend old Cy to Dandridge and himself, and he made his preparations for the enterprise, saying little or nothing. Rachel had already agreed to come to them whenever they should send for her.

It was a week from that day that, with a pack of simple provisions, with rifles, picks, hatchets and pruning-knives, and some twine hammocks in addition, Julian and his party started on their excursion, as they called it, Julian carrying on his back—greatly to old Cy's disturbance, but, then, old Cy couldn't carry everything himself—a bundle wrapped in moss, which he gayly declared they must save first in case of fire, for it was all their fortune.

"Bress yer heart, honey," said old Cy, "where's dis yer fire gwine ter be, onlest Mars' Dan knocks my pipe onto a cypress-tree? An' it's so damp in dese yer swamps, 'spect it'll put de pipe out anyhow."

They made their beds that night in the hammocks that they slung high in the boughs, and

that Julian had brought along against the wishes of old Cy, who thought a bed of broken boughs fit for a king, snake or not.

What a scene it was on which their eyes opened in the early morning! Cedars superb as the cedars of Lebanon, dropping great circles of shade, the huge live-oaks, trembling with webs and festoons of grey moss, that made sheets of diamonds as it swung in the sun, here and there a palm-tree, lifting its green crown in the clear air, and vistas into the rich verdure of the swamp beyond, gay with every color, and sweet with every scent of honeysuckle, vanilla, heliotrope, and great unknown flowers.

In and out the thickets flashed wings like jewels; scarlet flamingoes stood in the pools, the great white heron rose heavily, and little alligators, that looked as if they were living bronzes, crept up to sun themselves on the banks.

After they had finished their frugal breakfast, and rolled their hammocks in the smallest knot they could make, they pushed on after old Cyrus, who knew the paths and by-paths to everywhere, and they were only a week on their way, adding to their larder game brought down by their rifles, before they came up from the swamp they had skirted, and found themselves on the big hummock of Okemolkekee Everglade.

What a strange place it was, and what a wilderness of wealth it looked to Julian! It was a slight elevation, but a few feet in all above the swamp, and its rich lands had become a forest of the bitter wild orange, at present of no good to anybody,

except in its season of bloom, when the rapturously delicious fragrance drifted for miles on the soft air.

"We will explore a mile or two to-day," said Julian, "and mark the trees we think best to keep, and thin out all the others, the first thing we do."

It was a busy day they had of it, and many a busy day that followed, while they let sun and air into the great thicket, and, as far as possible, saved trees in the regularity they would have had if set out in an orchard. Three or four times before they finished, Cyrus left them and returned for provisions, the second time bringing his son Darius with him. And at last the wilderness was cleared, and every tree remaining in the first section had received the bud of the sweet orange, which had been the precious freight of Julian's moss-wrapped bundle.

"Now," said Julian, "while these are accommodating themselves to the new circumstances, we will go ahead and clear out next year's extension. I don't know exactly how long this hummock is, but in time I mean to get all the worthless growth cleared out of so much of it as belongs to father, if it's ten miles, and every tree left grafted, and we'll have every sort of orange that grows: the blood-red Maltese, the spicy little Mandarin, and all the rest. This is better than standing behind counters or over desks, isn't it, Dan?"

"Heap sweeter work than picking cotton on the field, honey," said old Cy.

What a day it was to the boys and the old servant when the whole orange forest, as far as eye could see, burst out in flower, with such a blossoming as would have wreathed all the brides of the earth with snowy sprays, and whose rich, rare odors one would think might have sailed over the seas themselves, and penetrated foreign countries with their sweetness.

"Now," said Julian, to his brother and confidant, "we want to be fit for what's coming. Don't let's waste any time. Dr. Yancey has books enough, and he'll tell us what to read, and we'll go and see him and begin to get an education." And so much of their plan as this they announced to the family.

"I'm sure I don't see what you can be thinking about," whimpered his sister Frannie, "when we're all but starving."

But Rachel was the only one who took hold of the books with them, and labored along as near them as she could follow; and before the year was out it was surprising how much those lads and the young girl had put into their memories. Twice a year Julian and Dan and old Cy and Darius went off on what their mother called their wicked and idle shooting, for which she didn't see why their father was willing to spare them old Cy. But the father kept the secret. They believed it would make the mother happy enough by-and-by.

Some years later, they set out early one morning for the orange hummock, the father having left a note for the mother, saying that he was going with the boys, and going to take Rachel.

Nobody enjoyed the whole enterprise more than Rachel, who was a helpful little body, and knew of countless methods of adding to their comfort on the way. Her own comfort was secured by the little donkey that Cy had borrowed of Dr. Yancey and on which she rode.

"You'll have to be a lot of use, Rachel, as soon as we get there," said Julian, "and so has Mr. Father."

But when she did get there, she found as romantic a little hut, made of orange boughs, with two rooms in it, too, that the boys had

made for her the last time they were there, as one could have out of a fairy story; and long before she reached the place she could have found the way by the odors blowing towards her; and when, all at once, the orange-forest—not any orange-grove or plantation, but the orange-forest—burst upon her in full gorgeous fruit she could

have cried with rapture, only she knew her father liked to have her staid and quiet. But she knew she had come to help them gather their fortune, and all hands began at once.

"We made a raft, you see, father," said Julian, "the last time we were here, too, and we can float it; and there is a raft tied up under the bushes there, and that will let us into the water ways to the St. John's. If we sell our oranges well, we'll have a better equipment next year. After that, patience, patience, father! When we've rafted down one lot we'll come back for the next. When those first old Spanish colonists, three hundred years ago, brought over a few orange shoots from Seville, do you believe it ever once occurred to them that such a forest as this would find a place here?"

It was all as Julian said, and when they had finished their voyaging and sold the last orange, the boys went back with their father, and made their mother a visit, and stopped all her reproaches by telling her their story. Shortly after that, masons and carpenters and gardeners were at work upon the house and the grounds; and then the boys had taken servants and mules with them, and had gone back to the Okemolkeke hummock, and Rachel, with her mother's consent, had gone along, to keep the mildew off, Dan said, while they cleared out the hummock farther along, grafting new trees and tending old ones, and read their books at night, by the light of burning pitch-pine knots, before the little hut in the centre of their orange-trees, that seemed to bud and bloom as if they knew the work they were doing for the family that had two such sons, and such a daughter as Rachel, in it.

It was a half-dozen years later, that I met at New Orleans a stately old gentleman, dressed faultlessly; on his arm was a pale and graceful lady whose face, happy and smiling though it was, bore traces of old discontent and sorrow. There was a group of young people in the distance, busy over trunks and baskets and wraps,—Frannie and Rebecca, and little Rachel, grown as tall and handsome as they, and their pert and

pretty quadroom waiting-maid; and James, who had grandly thrown up the place under Government, anxiety to keep which had once nearly worn his life out; and the two boys, who had forgotten there was such a thing as a shop-counter or an oyster-scow; and Darius, grinning like a masque and old Cy, hovering round Julian and Dandridge as if they were the chief treasures of the family, and losing them, one lost orange-groves and all.

"Yes," said the stately old gentleman, "yes, we are on the way to see the boys off to Europe, to give them the advantages of the best education. Splendid boys, sir,—deserve the best there is, and I am able to give it to them, and they shall have it.

"Am I still in the cotton business? Oh no; the cotton business left me with the war. I am largely interested in orange-growing.

"My boys—fine young men—early turned their attention to the wild bitter orange on my waste lands, and thanks to them,—I mean, thanks to Julian and Dandridge there,—you will hardly believe it, but I receive more than ten thousand dollars a year clear profit from my orange-groves!"

The steamer bore away over the old Spanish main, to Gibraltar and Genoa, two promising young men, if young they might be called, when nearly thirty. Ten years had changed their fortune. The old hummock still blossoms and bears, and becomes a richer income yearly, and is likely to do so until "the boys" are old.

NOV. 4, 1886.

THE YOUTH'S COMPANION.